



Variety

They all came to India with a dream. But these expats ended up in Mumbai's kitchens

by Antoine Lewis

# FOREIGN LEGION



**T**WENTY-FOUR years ago, at the age of 51, Italian textile engineer Giovanni Autunno came to India to set up the Benetton chain of stores. But things didn't work out and after a business disagreement with the Indian partners, Autunno returned to Italy, only to come back to India to marry the Indian lady he had fallen in love with.

His early retirement was interrupted when Little Italy, then a single outlet in Juhu, asked him to be the face of their restaurant. What they didn't count on was that the burly Italian, whose family had been in the restaurant business for generations and who maintains that tomato ragu, not blood, flows in his veins, would take over the kitchen.

Though Autunno was aghast at the idea of having to cook vegetarian food, he transformed Little Italy into one of the best Italian restaurants in the city. His

contribution was duly noted, and in 1999 he received the Best Chef award from the Italian President in Rome while Little Italy won the Best Vegetarian award the same year. Today, his restaurant Don Giovanni is considered to be the best fine-dining Italian stand-alone restaurant in Mumbai.

## ACCIDENTAL TOURISTS

Autunno's story is the story of most foreigners who've entered the restaurant industry in India. Most came for a completely different purpose, but suddenly found an untapped market that was open to new ideas and influences. Yasser Ali for instance, an American of Indian origin, arrived in India with the intention of doing social work. When that didn't work out and he discovered the potential for gelato, he and a few partners set up the gourmet gelato chain Amore.

Very few foreigners came to India with

the intention of working in a restaurant. For Gianfrancesco Perrone, the move was planned but the position of General Manager of Casa Mia serendipitously fell into his lap. The London-based journalist and his Indian wife had already decided to return to India when a friend offered Perrone a job. He was launching a new venture jointly with an Italian chain of restaurants. "Most stand-alones don't have an Italian connection," Perrone says, explaining why he chose to get involved.

While many five-star hotels had started hiring expat chefs and managers by the '80s, there were barely two or three foreigners working outside the hotel circuit even until the turn of the century. This was because most restaurants were run and patronised by families, and usually

**WHAT I WANTED WAS TO MAKE REAL ITALIAN FOOD**

**— GIOVANNI AUTUNNO, Don Giovanni**



served Indian food or Indianised Chinese. There was no need of foreign chefs, for there were neither international cuisines being offered nor was there variety in terms of the types of restaurants.

When Autunno joined Little Italy around 1994, the only specialty Italian restaurant in the city was Trattoria at the Taj President, though continental restaurants would serve a few Indianised Italian dishes. Autunno's culinary background helped him recreate non-vegetarian flavours using vegetarian ingredients without compromising on the traditional tastes and identity of the food. "What I wanted was to make real Italian food," he says explaining that chopped brinjals were sautéed hard to recreate the taste of bacon in the Spaghetti Amatriciana and fried arbi was used to substitute the taste of beef marrow for the Risotto Milanaise. What Autunno brought, and had been missing all along, was a deep knowledge and expertise in an international cuisine.

### TASTING NOTES

By the middle of the last decade, however the stand-alone restaurant scene had changed completely. While most new restaurants chose to be within the safe mid-priced segment, a few had emerged that were sophisticated enough to be compared with five-star restaurants. The restaurant business had become mature enough to be differentiated and segmented not simply by cuisine, but also by price and experience and therefore by clientele. These high-end restaurants targeted the nouveau riche, a clientele that may not have known much about food but wanted beautiful places and food that came close to, if not matched, international standards.

But here restaurateurs faced a problem, as there was a huge gap between what was required and what was available in terms of talent. Family-run restaurants had never attracted trained professionals before, and students from hotel management institutes steered clear of such establishments as only hotels offered them reasonable salaries and an opportunity for career growth. When restaurants did find local talent, they discovered a second problem: their clients who were just about getting used to the new cuisines weren't

## THE NOTION OF AN INDIAN CHEF DOING WESTERN FOOD WAS NOT ACCEPTED

– AD Singh of Olive

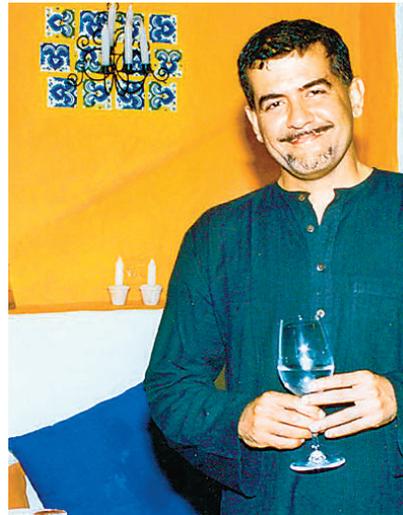


PHOTO: SATTISH BATE

willing to accept Indian chefs.

Restaurateur AD Singh, whose Olive Restaurant and Bar was one of the first of the new wave of restaurants, says that at the time they opened, "Mediterranean was somewhat unknown. The consumer perception of an Indian chef doing western food was not really accepted." It became easier to import talent, especially since stand-alone restaurants could afford to pay their expats substantial salaries. While chefs Evan Gwynne followed by Massimiliano Orlati took over Olive, Chinese restaurants like Royal China were being manned by Chinese chefs.

But it was not just fine-dining restaurants that required expat chefs to ensure that quality standards were maintained and come up with new menus. At Little Italy, Dario Dezio replaced Autunno and helped them expand their menu while at Casa Mia it's up to Perrone to watch quality. Though the Casa Mia kitchen staff has been trained by an Italian chef, Perrone is the only Italian and he makes sure that the food is good enough for him to be proud to bring another Italian to his restaurant. Perrone may not have an industry background, but growing up on a farm where they produced their own olive oil and ate traditional food gives him a strong enough connection with the cuisine.

### NEW FLAVOURS

Nitin Tandon, who runs Lemongrass Café at Bandra, provides an example of why having an expat rooted in the cuisine is important. One of the dishes on his menu is the Indonesian dish nasi goreng, the preparation of which requires the condiment kecap manis. An Indonesian guest noticed its absence and pointed it out to Tandon, who in turn queried his chef. The chef, an Indian, being unfamiliar with Indonesian food, had stopped adding the kecap as he believed that it didn't affect the flavour. Which is why Autunno, who makes everything in-house at Don Giovanni, is at the restaurant every day checking up on everything from the bread to the desserts.

While culinary knowledge and skills have been their most important assets, they haven't been the only contribution of expat professionals. What they've also introduced are new concepts and ways of running restaurants. Zenzi, for instance, which is partly owned by Dutch partners, boldly threw an unheard of work-in-progress party even before the restaurant was completely ready. Helmed by general manager Matan Schbraq and Mumbai's first Nobu-trained chef Shahaf Shabtay, Zenzi also introduced Mumbai to contemporary Asian food and the idea of a sophisticated but casual lounge bar. What they also brought was a spirit of daring and adventure as Emiliano Collazo, the current general manager of Zenzi and Zenzi Mills, explains, "We hold art exhibitions every month and some of them push the boundaries. Recently we held a photography exhibition of an artist who had spent time shooting prostitutes in Laos. It was a tricky thing to do as it could have offended



## WE EAT AND DRINK WITH OUR GUESTS AND GO TO EXHIBITIONS TOGETHER. SOMETIMES WE PARTY TOGETHER

– EMILIANO COLLAZO, Zenzi and Zenzi Mills



**I CAME TO INDIA WITH THE INTENTION OF DOING SOCIAL WORK**  
 – YASSER ALI, Amore gelato

people. But since the message had a lot of integrity we decided to go ahead.”

Zenzi Mills was also the first to introduce the idea of a ‘crush bar’ to India. Collazo explains that while all of us have clear notions of public and private space, these distances get broken down when there is no choice. So just as you’re willing to accept someone’s armpit in your nose in a packed train, in a bar where everyone has no space, private groups dissolve and the entire bar turns into one party. The idea based on the party bars of Amsterdam which are essentially places that people won’t enter until they’re packed and buzzing wasn’t received too well at first. “Initially people were uncomfortable but they kept coming back.”

**BRIDGING THE GAP**

Amore may not have been the first gelato chain in India, but it is one of the few businesses that stresses on corporate responsibility. It has tied up with Navdanya for organic ingredients, Under the Mango Tree for fair trade honey and uses eco-friendly cups, spoons, tissues etc.

Collazo points to two other interlinked roles that expats play on the scene. Firstly he points out that in most Indian restaurants, the staff and guests come from two different classes. As a result, it’s not a relationship between equals. With expats however it is, because, “We eat and drink together with our guests and

go to exhibitions together. Sometimes we party together, not just at our restaurant but at other restaurants as well.”

But expats can also act as a bridge between restaurant owners and their guests. The gap here is not between levels of wealth but between outlooks says Collazo. Many businessmen invest in the restaurant business because it’s considered to be glamorous, but not all investors come from the same background as their patrons. “Often there’s a gap between the mindset of the customers and owners,” finds Collazo, which the owners can’t overcome since they don’t have a hospitality background.

Tandon also believes that expats are slowly influencing back-end restaurant operations through the introduction of new technologies. One area where their presence has drastically changed the way we eat has been in the area of baking and patisserie. The surreptitious adoption of cost- and time-saving cake and bread mixes has resulted in a uniformity of tastes and textures even among competing products. “Today all the bakery products that we eat are of a very consistent quality comparable with those from Europe, but they all taste very unnatural and engineered,” maintains Tandon who also runs a large pastry business.

The number of expats in the restaurant business is as yet miniscule. Nonetheless, some like Autunno, whose high standards and pioneering work justifiably make him the father of stand-alone Italian restaurants in Mumbai, have left an indelible mark. But as the number of restaurants continues to grow, expats may have a more significant influence.

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**THE GOAN CONNECTION**

The one region with an abundance of expat-run restaurants is Goa. The surrogate home of a multitude of foreigners, the state offers an astounding range of eateries - some of which can easily compare with Delhi and Mumbai’s hottest spots.

**BOMRAS** in Candolim offers modernised and refined Burmese. Run by chef Bawm-ra Jap, it is considered by some to be the best Burmese restaurant in the world!



A Burmese spread at Bomra’s

Then there’s **LA FENICE** in Calangute, with a patchwork of multi-levelled terraces. Run by an Italian chef. Great for carpaccio and caprese under starlight. Along the Baga Road, you’ll find **LE RESTAURANT FRANCIAS** run by a trio of French owners and serving classic French cuisine.



La Fenice’s menu includes this prawn starter

Maria Perez and Christian Perrot’s restaurant and hotel **KU** in Morjim is considered one of the most beautiful spots in Goa. The gourmet Asian and Mediterranean menu includes Thai summer rolls, Vietnamese pho bo soup, Thai tom yam soup and Andalusian veloute. Set along Baga Creek is **LILA CAFÉ** - owned and run by Elisabeth Saal, who has lived in Goa for over 20 years. Famous for its breakfasts, brunches and pumpernickel, whole wheat and German breads, everything here is natural and homemade.